

## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

May 1, 2014

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## YRTC-K Youth Volunteer with Therapeutic Horseback Riding Program

**Kearney**— Young men at the Youth Rehabilitation and Treatment Center at Kearney (YRTC-K) mature and grow, in part, because of their work with YRTC-K staff on campus. But each summer, YRTC-K youth expand on those lessons with the help of some unlikely teachers – the horses with the Kearney Therapeutic Horseback Riding Program (KTHRP).

Thursday mornings in June and July, YRTC-K youth volunteer to clean stables, pull weeds, organize the tack room and groom horses for the KTHRP.

The service organization, which is housed at the Bentz Stables at 56th Street and Buffalo Avenue in Kearney, helps individuals with special needs interact with horses.

KTHRP founder Carter Siebke, a certified North American Riding for the Handicapped Association instructor, created the program to combine his love of horses and his desire to help individuals with special needs.

In May 2010, Siebke approached Rey Rodriguez, YRTC-K facility operating officer about working with YRTC-K youth. From there, YRTC-K staff and Siebke came up with the initial program plan.

The program's goal was to teach the youth about KTHRP and help them learn to ride a horse. In the process, the youths get the therapeutic benefits of working with horses.

"Animals sense things humans can't even sense about themselves. They're soothing," said Steve Huffman, youth counselor supervisor at YRTC-K who has worked with the program since it started, "A lot of these kids have gone to the stables and they come back to campus and they're different after they have had that interaction with an animal."

Nancy Lyon, a teacher at YRTC-K's West Kearney High School, agrees. She has seen how working with horses affects people. Lyon volunteered with the KTHRP before the riding program began working with YRTC-K youth.

Last year, she started working with the YRTC-K youth in the program. Many are her students at West Kearney High School, which allows her to take lessons learned at the stables into the classroom.

"In the classroom, opportunities are given for the youths to reflect on their time with the horses. We are able to process some of their thoughts and feelings," she said.

At the stables, the program begins each June and the youths are assigned a horse to work with throughout the summer. They learn basic grooming techniques, and as the summer progresses, they become more involved with the horses.

As the youths develop relationships with the horses, they learn new communication and behavioral skills. Because horses are very intuitive and are affected by the non-verbal communication of humans, the youths have to rethink their behavior to gain the horses' trust.

"The horses demand respect to provide respect," Lyon said. "Due to their size, they are not easily bullied or manipulated."

Horses also have a tendency to mirror human behavior, something the youths in the program experience firsthand. One participant noticed that when he was stubborn or set in his ways, his horse, in turn, would be stubborn too – refusing to follow commands, walk forward or even move. In the classroom, he recognized his effect on the horse's behavior. For him to be successful with the horse, he realized he had to change his behavior too.

"As the youth learn to work with the horses, they become more aware of the horse's nonverbal cues," Lyon said. "It provides the youth with in-the-moment experiences to learn how to manage their current situations and future challenges."

The youths learn about trust as they bond with their horses. Since horses do not trust easily, this is something they have in common with many of the YRTC-K youth, Lyon said.

"For a variety of reasons, the youth have also learned not to trust. This creates a unique opportunity for the youth and the horse to learn to work together to form a bond," she said.

This bond is developed throughout the course of the program. The youths start by grooming the horses, leading them, and about three to four weeks into the program, they have the option to ride them.

All the youths participating in the program have signed consent forms from their parents or guardians and are never forced to ride.

"They have to be comfortable enough to do it. No one is forced," Huffman said, "But nine out of 10 times, the kids will ride."

By this point in the program, Huffman said the youth have often developed a sense of ownership and a deeper relationship with their horse. A relationship that has become therapeutic, and also, educational.

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Lyon said the youths learn through every step of the program – about the horses, about their behavior and about themselves. She is encouraged by watching them work through that process.

“Any time the youths learn something new about themselves and then work through that process – rather than run from it – that can only benefit them and the world around them,” she said.

YRTC-K currently serves 95 youths and is part of DHHS under the Division of Children and Family Services.